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Guide to the Perplexed

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that he should look to it for advice as to where to go for counsel. 3. Some people, I believe, will never go to an agency direct. Here is one of the most important findings of the piece of work I have been doing.

I began with the idea that most people who write to these columns are either insane or unbalanced or people who have an axe to grind. To my astonishment I discovered that, on the whole, the people who write to me through my column appear to be more intelligent than those who go to agencies.

That has opened my eyes—to see that the people who seek advice through these columns are not helpless, clinging, dependent types. (Those helpless, clinging, dependent ones never do bother to write letters, they just go around and throw themselves on the doorstep of the nearest agency.) The ones who write letters to the marriage columnist are those who believe they have certain ca-

pacities to handle their own problems, but have reached a point where they are stuck, and want to see the next step so that they can proceed to find their own solution.

Therefore the column brings us in touch with a great number of people who need help but will not seek it through the ordinary counseling agencies until, as a result of correspondence, the validity and applicability of the counseling agency to their problem is made so clear to them that, because they are sensible people, they will take the logical step and go.

What we have to decide is not whether we want to go on having advice columns. That is already settled. The question for us is whether we are prepared to take over and help to direct these columns, so that they will be run competently and responsibly; or whether we are to leave the many thousands of people who seek help in that way at the mercy of the untrained and the unqualified.

Guide to the Perplexed

By ROSE FRANZBLAU

New York City

THE column, "Guide to the Perplexed," which appears in the New York City newspaper, the "Daily Compass," is an experiment in the use of a mass medium for the dissemination of mental hygiene principles and information.

This title was chosen for the column to avoid the impression that it is a clinic for therapy by correspondence or that it would in any way substitute for the individual help offered by doctors or social agencies.

Although the letters chosen to be answered in the column deal with the normal problems of normal people, the use of the word problem in the title was avoided. It is evidently more acceptable to be perplexed. But a stigma still attaches to people admitting that they suffer from psychological difficulties. It is somehow still a sign of weakness, inadequacy and failure.

The questions and cases presented in the letters cover a wide range of problems. A recent preliminary analysis of the letters received during the first six months showed that the problems divide themselves as follows:

- 35% deal with marital difficulties
- 35% deal with parent-child relationships and the rearing of children
- 15% ask for referral to clinics, agencies or psychiatrists for psychological help
- 8% are from women who want to know how, when and where to meet eligible males
- 4% ask for vocational guidance or for referrals to testing and guidance centers
- 3% are from people who are very disturbed—often of a depressed type with strong paranoid symptoms

About one out of every ten to fifteen letters is answered in the column. There are a number of criteria on the basis of which choice of letters for reply is made. The most important among these are the incidence of the problem among the population at large, lack of good, readily available literature on the problem, and whether or not it provides a suitable springboard for the enunciation or reiteration of important mental hygiene principles with which we wish to acquaint the public.

The writer of the column was fully aware of the hurdles and pitfalls inherent in such an undertaking. The translation of scientific terminology into readily comprehensible, everyday language is almost like developing a new language.

The difficulty of explaining certain basic concepts of dynamic psychology such as the oedipus complex, the castration fears, infantile sex theories and phantasies and the like, in these elementary terms is tremendous. It is hard to make this translation without losing correctness of meaning or accuracy of implications. An ill-used adjective or even a misplaced comma can open one to serious misinterpretation.

This still remains the greatest danger to be avoided. The single greatest obstacle to be overcome was that of bringing people an understanding of their problem through the medium of the written word, within the confines of a column or two.

An analysis of all these considerations convinced the writer that if the project were to be successful and useful,

it could not be based on the judgment and knowledge of one person alone.

To do justice to such an undertaking, it seemed desirable for a board of voluntary consultants, consisting of psychoanalysts, psychologists, psychiatric social workers, marriage counselors and representatives of the family service agencies to be constituted. These serve in an advisory and consultative capacity to the writer.

The voluntary contribution of time and services which these consultants have made and their splendid response and cooperation have been one of the most gratifying and rewarding experiences of this writer.

At the request of the writer three agencies made a pilot survey to ascertain the number of people now in active treatment who had been referred originally through the column. One agency, that had been mentioned eight times in the column, had nineteen people in active treatment. Another agency, mentioned four times, had six in treatment, and the third, mentioned five times, had nine in treatment.

Research is now being planned to ascertain the value and effectiveness of this column as an educational and informational device. Although certain trends are already discernible, the analysis will not begin until the column has appeared for one full year.

Even with the finest research techniques available, we never know how much good such a column does, and perhaps we never will know what harm it may do. But that is a calculated risk that must be taken. The newspaper is one of the media we must use in a battle for good healthy psychological development. But it is only one fork of a multipronged weapon, all of which must be experimented with and used if we are to make any headway in this field.

Discussion

I guess I'm five years behind Dr. Mace, because I still view advice columns with a skeptical eye. No doubt, the large-circulation newspaper offers an extremely valuable vehicle *potentially* for the dissemination of personal and family counsel, thus helping to relieve the present shortage of available and accessible agencies.

It would be fine if professionals of the calibre of Mace and Franzblau could fill these gaps. But when we get down to actualities rather than potentialities, we find many millions of Americans exposed to "advice" that is generally innocuous, and fatuous when it is harmless, and not only harmful but often disastrous when it is actively directive.

How many fateful decisions have been made not only by those who solicit advice from columnists, but those who "identify" with the questioners, on the basis of responses tossed off by careless, ignorant, cynical and/or sadistic columnists? Hordes of American reporters can tell you of their stunt as "Nellie Knowitalls" and the like whose fictitious by-lines headed our most famous advice-to-the-lovelorn columns—often during a period when these reporters were serving as cubs or even as copy-boys. It is a known fact that many "advice" columns are written by sports writers, police reporters, and copy-desk men taking turns as coy counselors.

It is also a fact, most unfortunate, that many of our presentday advice columnists boasting the highest circulation are worse than unqualified amateurs; they are arrogant, dogmatic amateurs who have come to regard themselves as Cassandras and Solomons.

It is universally true, as Dr. Mace suggests, that the advice column is one of the most faithfully read of all newspaper features. This fact affords no occasion for unremitting joy; it means, in too many instances, that the most dangerous kind of reading is given the widest circulation. Those of us who are or have been in the newspaper field know that many editors judge an advice column's success not by the standards of accuracy, sobriety and integrity, but by the standard of "interesting copy." It need not be truthful so long as it is readable; if truth impedes readability, it is blue-penciled out. The question of providing a service for readers is too often secondary to the basic problem of selling papers.

As I see it, the simple stark fact of space requirements constitutes one of the greatest obstacles to conducting sound advice columns. How can any worthwhile analysis of the complex problems of everyday life be presented adequately in the modest space allowed the question-and-answer column in the average newspaper? How much harm is done by the resort to over-simplification imposed by space limitations—by the virtual caricaturing of problems and solutions that inevitably result? Dr. Franzblau, in her column, has sought to overcome this formidable difficulty by running many of her answers in series of two days' columns or more. But I wonder how much of the original question and partial answer remain in the memory of the reader who rushes through his newspaper while hanging from a subway strap or reading it at home with an ear cocked to the family radio?

It isn't only the amateur who may do harm. I recall, recently on the west coast, reading a syndicated advice column conducted by a very well-known professional family counselor. The column consisted of an alleged reader's letter and a reply. (The columnist later told me that it wasn't a "real" letter, but synthesized a number of inquiries recently put to him.) The letter was from a woman troubled about what Professor Kinsey had to say about male sex behavior in his book. She was about to get married, but she didn't want to go through with it if her husband-to-be was "that kind of man." The columnist's reply, in effect, was: Don't worry, madam, the experts have proved that Kinsey is all wet. American men don't behave that way, at all. Get married, and have no fear.

That advice sounds reassuring. But suppose the troubled questioner gets married—with all her illusions about "purity" left intact by the counselor—and then finds that her husband is what she deems a "vile beast" in his sexual deportment. Since she has already been assured by an expert that normal American men act just like good Victorians said they did, then isn't her husband an abnormal fiend, bizarrely different than the others? What price this kind of "reassurance"?

Yes, by all means let's take advantage of the wide-open newspaper market for "advice columns." But let's inquire into the legitimate scope and operation of *sound* columns, set adequate standards, and let's cover the field, firmly insistent on the basic standards of good counseling, without compromising away vital principles for a mess of "mass circulation."

ALBERT DEUTSCH

New York City

A professional person who attempts to popularize basic insights and established data must have the courage to face several occupational hazards. He must take the criticism of his colleagues who would keep the profession "pure," the jargon mystifying and the unenlightened masses in the dark. He must grapple with the problem of translating complex realities into simple one-two-three terms, knowing while he does it that many pertinent, relevant factors are being ignored in his

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

A limited number of files of *Marriage and Family Living* are available unbound @ \$5.00 per vol. through 1946; and \$3.00 per vol. 1947-1950. Bound in 3-year volumes at modest additional charge. Single issues, to complete your files, @ \$1.50 per copy through vol. 8 (1946); thereafter @ \$1.00.

The Journal would like to buy copies of the following issues @ \$1.50: vol. 2, no. 4; vol. 3, no. 4; vol. 4, no. 1; vol. 5, no. 2; vol. 6, no. 3.

Reprints available of the following articles in this issue: "Articles of Interest to Marriage and Family Life Educators and Counselors" by A. Ellis et al., and "Courses in Marriage Counseling" by Mildred I. Morgan. 1-9 copies @ 35¢; 10-24 copies @ 30¢; 25-49 copies @ 25¢; 50 or more copies @ 20¢. On consignment.

Directory of Organizations

American Association of Marriage Counselors, Inc., 270 Park Avenue, Suite 7G, New York 17, New York. Professional association interested in establishment and maintenance of standards in marriage counseling field. Provides information services to the public and allied professions. Referral to qualified marriage counselors and marriage counseling services on written request. (The Association, itself, offers no clinical services.)

American Social Hygiene Association, 1790 Broadway, New York 19, New York. Sound publications on educa-

tion for personal and family living, community and public health aspects of social hygiene. Write for lists.

Kansas City Social Hygiene Society, 1020 McGee, Kansas City 6, Missouri. Pamphlet Service—wide selection in Sex Education, Marriage and Family Life. Catalogue on request.

Marriage Council of Philadelphia, 1422 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia 2, Pennsylvania.

National Conference of Social Work, 22 West Gay Street, Columbus 15, Ohio. Annual Meeting, Atlantic City, New Jersey, May 13-18, 1951.

A directory of organizations will be published in each issue for ready reference. Send us the names of those you would like to see included.

Position Open*

P-1. City high school: upper southeast. To teach classes in foods, pre-nursing, and *family living*, with a home room. Salary schedule \$2400 for A-O certificate to \$4000 for G-13.

* Positions open may now be advertised in the Journal by colleges and universities, schools, community organizations, etc. Employers' names will be held strictly confidential, but the replies of applicants will be forwarded by our office. Rates for listing positions: two dollars per line of 53 letters and spaces, prepaid.

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attempt to simplify. He runs the danger of being misunderstood by his public, exploited by his followers, sniped at by his associates, driven by his editors, and hounded by his own conscience.

Yet such men of courage perform a very real service for our entire culture. In the face of the serious cultural lag in which our common insights into human behavior lag so far behind our acceptance of technological truth, it behooves our leaders to make themselves heard and understood by the public. If marriage counseling is ever to be accepted, as has general medicine for instance, a movement for public education must take place as effectively as has that in general health education. The "basic seven" may be an oversimplification of the principles of nutrition, but every school child has benefited by it. A marriage guidance column written by a professionally qualified and ethically sensitive person "sells" marriage counseling as it interprets its principles in ways that can be generally understood.

Too long have we stood aside and criticized an irresponsible press as

prone to headline the abnormalities and to ignore the positive news of our times. If our newspapers and magazines, if radio and television and the other mass media are to deal with the emergent truths in such dynamic areas as interpersonal relationships within marriage, in ways that will be constructive and healthful, they will need ongoing contact with the professionally adequate among us who by training and experience are qualified to be most helpful. This means that a professional "holier-than-thou" attitude must yield increasingly to a willingness to get into the sea of popular thinking and get our feet wet.

There will always be among us the pure scientist who is at home only in his clinic or laboratory. But the others who assume their roles as translators of the growing body of insights and understandings perform a service quite as valuable for our times.

EVELYN MILLIS DUVALL

National Council on Family Relations